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Loyalty and Devotion in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Khaled Hosseini, a Physician by Profession and a novelist by choice is born in Kabul, the capital city of Afghanistan on March 4th, 1965. He has lived in the United States since he was fifteen years old and is an American citizen. In 2006, Hosseini was made a Goodwill Envoy for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and he has been working to provide humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan through The Khaled Hosseini Foundation. Hosseini's devotion to Afghanistan can be seen not only in his writing but also in his activism.

Khaled Hosseini's first book *The Kite Runner* was published in 2003 that quickly became an International bestseller published in 48 countries. *The Kite Runner* is the first novel written in English by an Afghan in America creating space for emerging novelists of the Afghan Diaspora wanting to contribute to world literature. Khaled Hosseini's second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was written after Hosseini travelled back to his native Afghanistan after 27 years in 2003, to examine the nation's situation in the aftermath of decades of turmoil since Russian Invasion in 1979. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was released on May 22, 2007 that is presently published in 40 countries. Though both of his blockbuster novels, *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* have sold more than 38 million copies worldwide, but these novels are not yet published in Afghanistan.

Abstract

A Thousand Splendid Suns tells the story of Mariam and Laila, hailing from diametrically opposite backgrounds linked by a common fate, experiencing similar stereo-typical trials and tribulations of being Afghan women. They struggle to survive in Afghanistan as they traverse the mine-littered road of sexual hierarchy, nonstop war and overwhelming guilt for the sins of others. They not only undergo transformation in themselves but usher a new life style and existence for the generations to come. We come to know about their hardships, their daily struggle for survival against all odds, to raise a family and seek happiness. While all other characters revolve around these two characters, each character is endowed with an identity of its own. Constantly intersecting the character's personal narratives are the dreary and violent politics of Afghanistan over the last half-century, ranging from the communist takeover in the late 70's through the United States invasion of 2001 till 2003, when Taliban were ousted and Hamid Karzai became the interim president of Afghanistan.

Key-Words

Afghanistan, war and Destruction, Social plight, forced marriages and Sacred relationships.

Loyalty and devotion

Loyalty and devotion is the most prominent and inspiring theme of this novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. People show loyalty such as, Mariam, who shows a firm support in her friendship with Laila. Devotion is portrayed as a great love, affection or admiration. Every character in the novel shows loyalty and devotion to something or someone. These qualities are best seen in the

relations between Laila and her father, Babi; Laila and Tariq; as well as Mariam and Laila. Jalil pretends to be a devoted father to Mariam and she was completely devoted to her father. She admired him with every part of her being and, "*Mariam would leap to her feet when she spotted him hopping stones across the stream, all smiles and hearty waves.*" (p-21) But actually Jalil was ashamed of her because "*She was the walking, breathing embodiment of their shame.*" (p-48) Mariam didn't realize until later that the devotion she had for Jalil was based on false pretenses. Jalil's rejection of Mariam clearly indicates his true belief but at last he sought Mariam's forgiveness and reserved her share of inheritance for her. Nana was a loyal and dutiful mother who was not ashamed of her illegitimate child, Mariam. She warned Mariam,

"A man's heart is a wretched, wretched thing, Mariam. It isn't like a mother's womb. It won't bleed; it won't stretch to make room for you. I'm the only one who loves you. I'm all you have in this world, Mariam, and when I'm gone you'll have nothing. You'll have nothing. You are nothing!" (p-27)

She did her best to save Mariam from the miserable behaviour of her father but Mariam always believed her father. When Mariam rejected her mother by visiting her father in Herat, who did not allow her in his house but let her sleep on the doorsteps, Nana was forced to commit suicide leaving Mariam in the cruel hands of the society to suffer. Nana's death shows her devotions of Mariam and helps Mariam better understand Nana and her advices regarding Jalil. Eventually, Mariam's fifteenth birthday turned out to be the most tragic one she had ever experienced. She was rejected by both of her parents leaving her to suffer from the guilt that is sure to follow. Later, Mariam always missed her mother and her affection but she was not at her side. Mariam was ashamed of her behaviour and wished that she had been a devoted daughter to her mother because she always got benefited from her advices and devoted relations.

Laila shows the largest amount of Loyalty and Devotion in the novel. She was loyal to her father, her boyfriend Tariq, to Mariam and to her motherland Afghanistan. Laila and her father's relations are strong and devoted. Their relations are full of love, compassion and understanding. Laila loves her father more than life itself and understands his desires that she be an educated and a successful woman. He believed that education of women was important because, "*Society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila. No chance.*" (p-114) With the Mujahideen infighting all the schools and colleges were closed due to dangerous and life taking situations on the roads. Babi, who was devoted and loyal to her daughter, he himself took the responsibility of tutoring Laila at home because it was his belief that women will be needed to re-build Afghanistan. After Laila's safety, her education was his most important thing in his life. He told her that he has money enough to contribute to her education while the trip towards '*Buddha's of Bamiyan valley*'. He was a dutiful father and his devotions convinced Laila to return to Kabul back. Laila could have left with Tariq after they consummated their love, but she stopped because of the devotions of her father and for her ailing mother.

Laila was also devoted and loyal to her love and childhood friend, Tariq. Laila's loyalty and devotion to Tariq begins in childhood when they become fast friends and continued in adulthood till their marriage in Pakistan. Though they belonged to two different ethnic groups, still their relationship was true, full of love, vigor and understanding above all material comforts. When Tariq's family was to leave Kabul, he pleaded Laila to marry him and leave with them but she refused because of her devotions to her father but made intense love with Tariq before they separate with tears in their eyes and grievances in their hearts. She knew that she could not marry Tariq and leave her father alone with her mother. Laila had a clear understanding of the expectations and love that her father had for her. With their intense love making, Laila becomes pregnant and she brings Tariq's beautiful daughter into the world under the parentage of

Rasheed. Though married with Rasheed, she feels Tariq closer to her heart. She enjoyed his thoughts, smiles and actions in Aziza.

“Of all earthly pleasures, Laila's favourite was lying next to Aziza, her baby's face so close that she could watch her big pupils dilate and shrink. Laila loved running her finger over Aziza's pleasing, soft skin, over the dimpled knuckles, the folds of fat at her elbows. Sometimes she lay Aziza down on her chest and whispered into the soft crown of her head things about Tariq, the father who would always be a stranger to Aziza, whose face Aziza would never know.”(p-239)

Thoughts of Tariq never leave her or betray her and so when he comes back at her door, she warmly welcomes him with open arms and embraces him affectionately. She thinks nothing of bringing him inside at the risk of Rasheed finding it out. Later, she marries Tariq and looks towards a future of rebuilding Afghanistan.

Of course, the devotion and loyalty in the relationship between Mariam and Laila is the central one in the novel. The two women, belonging to two different backgrounds, are married to same abusive man, Rasheed who tortured them both for no fault of theirs. Their little fight over the missing spoons gave a cathartic release of their hidden hatred. Mariam's loyalty to Laila really began when she stopped Rasheed from beating Mariam.

“Laila examined Mariam's drooping cheeks; the eyelids that sagged in tired folds, the deep lines that framed her mouth-she saw these things as though she too were looking at someone for the first time. And, for the first time, it was not an adversary's face Laila saw but a face of grievances unspoken, burdens gone unprotested and a destiny submitted to and endured.”(p-243)

Although, they were not best friends at this point, a shift in the direction of their relationship was clear. They both are orphans and alone but this sacred relationship offers them comfort and they strip away remaining hidden secrets of their past including Mariam's being '*harami*' and her troubled history and Laila's plans to escape Rasheed. They bonded together in a mother daughter relationship full of loyalty, devotion and parental care,

“Mariam slowly grew accustomed to this tentative but pleasant companionship. She was eager for the three cups of *chai (Tea)* she and Laila would share in the yard, a nightly ritual now.”(p-245)

Through this loyal and devoted relationship, they unite against Rasheed and begin to envisage tension free life without Rasheed. In Laila's second time labour Mariam helped her like a devoted mother, where she fully understood the sacrifices made by a mother. She was sorry for rejecting her mother's love and wished that she had been a better daughter to her mother. Laila and Mariam helped each other cope with raising two small children, Aziza and Zalmai. Mariam was a devoted and loyal mother not only to Laila but to Aziza and Zalmai also. She loved them as they are her own children. Mariam thinks of Laila and Aziza as, “Two new flowers [that] had unexpectedly sprouted in her (Mariam's) life” (p-250).

Lastly, when Rasheed threatened to kill Laila by strangling her down, Mariam's devoted and loyal relations with Laila, compelled her to accept the fate of being Rasheed's murderer. Mariam showed her deepest level of devotion to Laila in the entire novel by killing Rasheed. Mariam devoted her life so that Laila could live hers and find a way to get out. This was the biggest proof of loyalty and devotion in the novel. Not only that, she offers up the last great devotion she can: her life. She puts herself in to offer a relaxed, happy and tension free life to Laila and her children. They wave her good bye not to see her again and the Taliban killed her for killing her husband.

After separating from Mariam, Laila had enjoyed her married life with Tariq, Aziza and Zalmai in Murree because it offered her comfort and tranquility that she always wished a life to be thankful for. But on July 2002, they discussed the changes back and Laila missed Kabul, the city of her childhood. She reminded Hakim's words that when the war is over, Afghanistan will need her and she also remembers her mother's words about seeing peace in Afghanistan to honour Ahmad and Noor. But most compellingly she missed Mariam and the sacrifices she had made for Laila and her children, but she wished to return Kabul for Mariam. She wanted to be the part of all the good things happening in Kabul. She wanted to do contribute towards Afghanistan's development. On her way to Heart Laila wondered, "How every Afghan story is marked by death and loss and unimaginable grief. And yet, she sees, people find a way to survive, to go on."(p-384) Laila thought of her own life and the killing of her friends, her parents and was astonished that at least she was alive. Back at Kabul, "Laila spots flowers potted in the empty shells of old Mujahideen rockets-rocket flowers, Kabuli's call them."(p-398) They all work together for the orphanage where Aziza once lived in 2001, which now really was a school. Tariq and Laila have been voluntarily involved with renovating the building. Laila's new pregnancy offers hope to the end of the book and the determination to name a female child after Mariam is a fitting tribute to her.

The greatest example of loyalty and devotion is furnished by Mariam and Laila. Individually they suffered loss and abuse by Rasheed, but when together they enjoyed and hoped for better and peaceful future for themselves and their children. Khaled Hosseini's message through this novel is that ultimate, unconditional loyalty and devotion can save Afghanistan from being barren, divided and destroyed.

With all of the characters in the novel, if they had not shown their levels of loyalty and devotion they would not have grown and changed into the people they were at the ending points of their lives in the novel. If Mariam had never had the devotion she had towards her father she wouldn't have ever married Rasheed and met Laila, and found happiness through the tragedies of her life. If Laila didn't have the loyalty and devotion to Tariq she would have given up on the thought of him shortly after he left, she probably would not have married him had she not had the extensive affection and love for him. Khaled Hosseini made a beautiful connection between the characters actions and the people and things that they were loyal and devoted to, he showed that these two words take on a very important part of every person's life in their true definition.

Conclusion

Though Khaled Hosseini has practiced internal medicine since 1996, he yearned to write. Hosseini felt estranged from the devastation in Afghanistan, but his separation from his homeland and his 'Western sensibility' combined in his fiction to bring America's, and the world's, attention to the faces of Afghanistan. The chief concerns of his characters are universal i.e. the struggle to survive against all odds, to raise a family and find happiness. These novels are written against a history that has not been told in fiction before. He describes the rich culture and beauty of a land in the process of being destroyed. Hosseini is a magician with words and depicts the beauty of his land, Afghanistan against the backdrop of war and devastation. Khaled Hosseini is concerned not only with the Taliban but with the lives of common Afghan people who only survive to see their loved ones dying and themselves to die the next morning. He is an advocate for the great need for creating bonds of amity between the Afghan people and the rest of the world. He has thrown the doors of his country wide open so that the world could see firsthand the real Afghanistan and the great Afghan people who are suffering for being Afghans. A nation that is waiting for the national and international justice that has evaded them for decades

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